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ABSTRACT

A major concern for those in higher education is whether the instruments they use for screening students are valid and predictive. Of particular interest is whether a grammar test, used in many institutions to screen students for developmental English, and a reading comprehension test, used to screen students for developmental reading, truly predict a student's ability to succeed in freshman composition. A study attempted to determine the difference in grammatical skills between two groups of developmental college students based on their reading comprehension skills as defined by their scores on the Basic Skills Examination--Reading Test. Grammatical skills were defined as the students' scores on the Basic Skills Examination--English. Findings showed that students who were required to take a developmental reading course scored significantly lower on the Basic Skills Examination--English than did students who were not required to take the course. This suggests that reading courses should emphasize how correct syntax leads to precise interpretation and that English courses should emphasize how incorrect syntax leads to ambiguous interpretations. (HOD)

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READING COMPREHENSION SCORES AS PREDICTORS OF GRAMMATICAL SKILLS AMONG DEVELOPMENTAL COLLEGE FRESHMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Few educators today would strongly disagree that there exists a near crisis situation in literacy among high school students. Colleges and universities across America are instituting developmental studies programs in which they offer remediation in basic English, reading, and math.

A major concern for higher education is whether the instruments they use for screening students are valid and predictive. Of particular interest is whether a grammar test, used in many institutions to screen students for developmental English, and a reading comprehension test, used to screen students for developmental reading, truly predict a student's ability to succeed in freshman composition. In many schools a requirement to complete either, or both, of these remedial courses effectively precludes a student from enrolling in freshman composition concurrently. There is the underlying assumption, which is probably a sound one, that a proficiency in grammatical and reading comprehension skills is a necessary prerequisite to a composition class.

It is understandable that a correlation between grammatical skills and composition skills is assumed, despite resolu-

tions of opposition passed by the Conference on College Composition in 1975, and by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1974, and the exhaustive bibliography compiled by J. Stephen Sherwin (1969). The assumed relationship between reading comprehension skills and composition skills is less obvious. However, if we define the reading process as Venezky, Calfee, and Chapman (1970) do, as a process by which a speaker translates alphabetical symbols into a form from which the speaker can derive meaning, the relationship is more easily understood. The assumed corollary to this definition is that composition is the process by which a speaker translates this meaning into alphabetical symbols; thus the relationship is one of reciprocity. Jenkinson (1970) points out that the meaning of words, lexical, syntactical, and structural, determines how well a reader comprehends a writer; the relationship between a knowledge of how language is written and comprehending it is apparent here, particularly the grammatical relationship between writing and reading.

If there is, then, a relationship between reading comprehension and writing skills, or more specifically between reading comprehension and grammatical skills, colleges need to establish whether their screening instruments indicate that relationship. If students who are poor readers are proportionately weaker in grammatical skills, this information should certainly be considered in the areas of program design and program implementation.

PROBLEM

This study attempted to determine the difference in grammatical skills between two groups of developmental college students based on their reading comprehension skills.

For purposes of definition, grammatical skills are defined as the students' scores on the Basic Skills Examination--English. Developmental students are defined as students who scored less than 410 on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Reading comprehension skills are defined as the students' scores on the Basic Skills Examination --Reading Test.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Very little research has been done on the specific relationship between grammatical skills and reading comprehension skills. The major portion of the literature available concentrates on reading as a psycholinguistic phenomenon, and its relationship to grammar is limited primarily to the discussion of transformations and deep structures of the language.

Wolfram (1976) is more specific than most of the linguistic literature available. Wolfram suggests that reading difficulties arise from "gaps"--when students do not apply the linguistic ability they have for oral language to reading comprehension. He suggests that teachers emphasize the everyday pragmatic usage of language so that students establish for themselves the relationship between oral speech and writing.

More specific studies seem to support both the psycholinguistic approach to reading and Wolfram's concept of reading.

Fagan (1971), based on his work with fourth, fifth, and sixth grade basal readers, suggests that teaching language structure as an aid to comprehension would be more effective when taught from the point of view of the transformational-generative model of grammar, since it allows students to see the relationship of spoken language to writing.

O'Donnell (1975), working with fourth, eighth, and eleventh grade students, found that there is a developmental difference in the students' ability to comprehend sentences, but was unable to define the difference based on his data.

Tomiyama (1979), working with ESL (English as a Second Language) students, found that the type of grammatical element omitted affected the students' performances on cloze-type measures of reading comprehension, again suggesting the importance of a grammatical construct to aid comprehension.

Stoodt (1972) found that there is a significant correlation between the ability to identify the relationship conjunctions signal and the ability to comprehend sentences. Stoodt also found that the conjunction for was more significant in this relationship than the conjunction and.

STATEMENT OF THE HYPOTHESIS

In view of the above studies showing the apparent relationship between grammatical skills and reading comprehension skills, it was hypothesized that developmental college freshmen who are required to take a developmental reading course are more deficient in grammatical skills than developmental

college freshmen who are not required to take a developmental reading course.

METHOD

Description of Subjects

The sample groups for this study were selected from among 315 college freshmen who took the Basic Skills Examination--Reading from November 10, 1980 until April 14, 1981. Using a table of random numbers, 30 students were assigned to Group A (students who scored below the local college norm or a T-score of 60, and thus were required to take a developmental reading course), and 30 students were assigned to Group B (students who scored above the local college norm or a T-score of 60, and were not required to take a developmental reading course).

Descriptions of the Instruments

The test instruments selected, the Basic Skills Examination--Reading and the Basic Skills Examination--English have been shown to be reliable measures of reading comprehension skills and grammatical skills in studies by the college's testing center (Reliability based on Kuder Richardson Formula 20 equals .75).

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The Basic Skills Examination--English was administered to both groups. The mean scores of Group A and Group B were compared using the t-test to determine if the difference between the two groups was significant. The results are presented in Table 1.

The obtained t-value was significant at the 0.05 level of confidence. Students who were required to take a developmental reading course scored significantly lower on the Basic Skills Examination--English than students who were not required to take a developmental reading course.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF DEVELOPMENTAL READING STUDENTS AND NON-DEVELOPMENTAL READING STUDENTS

Groups	N	Mean	S.D.	t-value
Group A	30	55.03	12.24	2.51*
Group B	30	64.70	8.24	

*p < .05

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study are in agreement with previous studies involving reading comprehension and grammatical skills reported earlier. There is a significant relationship between these two skills, and both developmental reading programs and developmental English programs should consider the interrelationship in terms of both program design and program implementation.

At the very least, it seems that the relationship between reading comprehension and grammatical skills should be considered in the adoption of textbooks for either reading or English classes.

In addition, emphasis in both courses on how syntax provides meaning seems a logical extension of the interrelationship. Reading courses should emphasize how correct syntax leads to precise interpretation; English courses should emphasize how incorrect syntax leads to ambiguous interpretations.

Further research is needed to define the precise relationship between reading comprehension and grammatical skills. Analysis of intercorrelations between items on the Basic Skills Examination--English and the Basic Skills Examination--Reading to determine if there is predictability from one test to the other would aid teachers in focusing on the precise skills common to both domains, as well as provide a useful diagnostic tool in either course.

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